

Wednesday, March 10, 2010

Council committee recommends funding to move bike trail forward

Long-delayed Metropolitan Branch Trail should receive \$12M, council members say

by Jason Tomassini | Staff Writer

A long-planned hiker-biker trail that would connect Silver Spring to downtown Washington, D.C., took a big step forward last week when Montgomery County Council members recommended funding for the final design of the trail and construction of its first phase.

A council subcommittee is recommending about \$12 million in the fiscal 2011-2016 Capital Improvements Program for the Metropolitan Branch Trail, an 8-mile trail connecting Silver Spring with Union Station in the District, via Takoma Park. Takoma Park has completed its portion of the trail and D.C. has begun construction of its portion, but after engineering for the Silver Spring portion was completed in early 2008, progress has stalled.

"It makes us look like we aren't serious," Councilwoman Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring. "... D.C. probably gets an 'A' or 'A-minus' for bike-friendliness but if you were grading Montgomery County, we would be about a 'C-minus.'"

In February, County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) set aside \$6 million in fiscal 2013 and 2014 of his recommended CIP to fund only the design of the trail and the land acquisition necessary to complete it, and install an interim trail in the meantime.

But at the urging of council staff, the Montgomery County Planning Board and Ervin, on March 2 the council's Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy and Environment committee bumped that recommendation up to \$12 million for the trail. That would pay for design of the entire trail, land acquisition and construction of the trail west of Georgia Avenue in Montgomery County.

The western portion will meet up with the Capital Crescent Trail that connects Bethesda to Georgetown and run through the under-construction Paul S. Sarbanes Silver Spring Transit Center. That portion of the trail will likely be finished by 2015, said Bruce Johnston, chief of the division of transportation engineering for the county Department of Transportation.

Leggett's proposal would have used the existing pedestrian bridge over Georgia Avenue as part of the interim trail but the council's proposal, as urged by the planning board, will building a new bridge over Georgia.

And once the trail is designed— expected in 18 to 24 months—negotiations can resume with CSX and WMATA, both of which own right-of-ways along the east portion of the trail near Selim Road, Johnston said.

"The second phase will have to wait until CSX and WMATA grant concurrence," Johnston said in a phone interview Thursday. "But we aren't waiting for them, they are waiting for us to design along Selim Road."

After the necessary property acquisition is complete, additional funds to construct the east portion of the Metropolitan Branch Trail can be requested and it can be linked with the Washington, D.C., portion. After the east portion is constructed the entire trail is expected to cost Montgomery County between \$21 and \$25 million, Johnston said. At that point, likely more than 10 years after DOT originally began designing the trail, Silver Spring bikers and hikers may finally have their link to D.C.

The full council must still agree to include the roughly \$12 million in the CIP when it makes final reconciliations in May. Ervin is not on the T&E subcommittee that unanimously recommended funding for trails; the committee includes Council President Nancy Floreen and councilmen George L. Leventhal and Roger Berliner.

Completion of the Metropolitan Branch Trail should coincide with the smaller Silver Spring Green Trail, which the Maryland Transit Administration will build on the north side of Wayne Avenue between Fenton Street and Sligo Creek as part of Purple Line construction. That isn't expected until at least 2014, but bike advocates know that when the trails finally come to fruition, at a time when traffic in Montgomery County will only be worse, people will rush to use them.

"The more facilities you have for people who are trying to minimize their use of a car," said Webb Smedley, president of the Woodside Civic Association, a Silver Spring neighborhood along the Metropolitan Branch Trail, "that will then create an environment where they will walk and use more transit."